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Security Comes First

Senator Symington's threat to public the secret estimates of Central Intelligence Agency performance raises the question of whether he is motivated more by anxiety for national defense than the desire to make hay in an election year.

The doubt is justifiable only because he swung this club in an earlier session, when it was bound to do so to the country. The senator was then, because of recent days he has heard Defense Secretary Gates, and other witnesses, downgrade the Soviet threat in long-range missiles, and according to his reading of a classified newspaper on this subject, the menace is proportionately greater than was thought at this time last year.

If the object was to gain attention, he made his point. The implication is that the administration is practicing a dangerous deception, which Symington can prove, if he breaches it.

Whether anything more than that can be said for his case is doubtful. Intelligence estimates are by nature vague, and range over 360 degrees, covering all possibilities. Therefore, related to any situation they may usually be read two ways.

Thus should Symington play fast and loose with security matter to protect the administration, its defenders have the choice of keeping silent or spreading more official secrets on the public record. Of this, there could be no end, once the dam is broken, and the ultimate gain to Soviet intelligence becomes immeasurable.

In trying to stop Symington, Senator Bush (R-Conn.) voiced the lament that our system seems incapable of keeping anything secret. To that, amen.